



Developers propose up to 12,000 homes along bayfront at Redwood City

By Paul Rogers, Mercury News

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Setting the stage for a major environmental battle, an Arizona developer on Tuesday unveiled plans to build as many as 12,000 homes along Redwood City's bayfront

The project would be the largest shoreline housing development in the Bay Area since Foster City was constructed nearly 50 years ago

The plan, proposed by DMB Associates of Scottsdale, Ariz., calls for converting vacant land owned by Cargill Salt east of Highway 101 into a community of perhaps 30,000 people.

Cargill and DMB, in partnership, say they hope to build a model "smart growth" project on the industrial salt evaporation ponds that would enable thousands of Silicon Valley workers to live closer to their jobs and avoid long commutes as the region grows.

"We don't view this as the typical developer-vs - environmentalist debate. This is smart growth vs. no growth," said John Bruno, vice president and general manager of the partnership, which is called Redwood City Industrial Saltworks LLC.

Although environmentalists have defeated numerous other bayfront development proposals along the Peninsula, Bruno said he hopes to break ground by 2013, by which time Silicon Valley's

economy will likely have rebounded.

"These housing units are going to need to be built," he added. "If they are not built here, they will be built in the Central Valley or Livermore."

But environmental groups are preparing for a showdown.

"The project should be dead on arrival. It is so out of touch with reality on the bay shoreline that Redwood City, state and federal agencies all have reasons to reject it," said David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay, a nonprofit group based in Oakland

Since 1901, the property has been used as industrial salt evaporation ponds to produce salt for roads, food and medicine.

Lewis and other environmentalists say that because the property was once part of the Bay's teeming marshes and sloughs, all of it should be restored to habitat for fish, birds and other wildlife.

Silicon Valley cities will need more housing, Lewis said. But it should be built close to downtowns, not up against the Bay, he said, citing the redevelopment of Bay Meadows racetrack in San Mateo as an example of a model project

"This argument that building in salt ponds is better than building in Tracy is a ridiculous false choice," Lewis said. "It implies those are the only two choices."

Environmentalists will work to kill the project at the City Council level, he said, and have not ruled out lawsuits or placing it on the ballot.

The project, which DMB will submit to the city next Tuesday, includes a mix of condominiums,

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apartments and attached housing on half the 1,433-acre site. There also would be 1 million square feet of office space, retail shops, a fire station, and a trolley system that would connect residents with downtown Redwood City and its Caltrain station, slightly less than a mile away across Highway 101.

The other half of the site would remain undeveloped. Roughly 440 acres would be converted back to tidal wetlands, and another 250 would become parks, baseball fields and soccer fields.

The whole project would take 25 years to develop, with ground being broken in 2013.

Long history

Environmentalists have a long history of defeating bayfront development in Redwood City.

In 1982, retired physicist and local resident Ralph Nobles organized a ballot measure to kill plans by Mobil Oil for 4,700 homes at Bair Island, just north of the Cargill site.

The area is now a wildlife refuge. In 2004, he helped defeat a plan to build 17 high-rise condominiums near the Port of Redwood City.

"People want to live here because there is a healthy San Francisco Bay," Nobles said last fall. "And if you destroy that, you destroy our most precious commodity."

The Cargill property was not included in a 2003 deal when the company sold 16,500 acres around Alviso, Fremont and Sunnyvale to the state and federal government for \$100 million to be restored as wetlands.

The property was already the subject of a

contentious election just last November when voters rejected Measure W, which would have required approval by two-thirds of Redwood City voters to develop not just the salt ponds but any open space land in Redwood City.

Redwood City Mayor Rosanne Foust said she wants to see more details before forming an opinion on the project.

"I don't see what digging my heels in on either side is going to do for anybody," she said. "I'd like the community to keep an open mind."

Permits needed

To win approval, the project will need permits from the Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Environmental Protection Agency and other entities.

Among them is the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, a state agency created by then-Gov. Ronald Reagan to limit Bay filling after Pebble Beach developer Jack Foster dumped 1.5 million dump trucks full of sand and mud on Brewer's Island beginning in 1958, wiping out vast wetlands for ducks, fish and harbor seals, but creating Foster City, now a community of 28,000 people.

"The issue is: Is this project smart growth or is it smart growth in a dumb location?" said Will Travis, executive director of BCDC. "The devil is in the details."

Foust said she hopes residents can have a civil debate.

"I don't want to see our community torn up like it was a year ago," she said. "I'll be asking people 'What are you willing to give and what are you

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Ironically, although DMB rolled out details of the Redwood City plan Tuesday, only last week the same company announced it was withdrawing another huge housing project on the Santa Clara-San Benito County line, citing the poor economy.

That project, El Rancho San Benito, was to have been a new city with 6,800 homes. But DMB said the job prospects and growth patterns are not the same on the Peninsula

"Each project we do is unique and has different attributes," Bruno said. "Decisions about Rancho San Benito are completely independent from Redwood City "

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